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Gestural Cinema?: Giorgio Agamben on Film

Gilles Deleuze's two-volume theory of film, _Cinema 1: The Movement-Image_ and _Cinema 2: The Time-Image_, have slowly been making an impact on Anglo-American film studies. The special issue of _Film-Philosophy_ on his work (vol. 5, 2001) and David Rodowick's excellent introduction, _Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine_ (1997), are just two signs, among many, of the growing interest in Deleuze's writings on cinema. His work has also inspired the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben to propose a new theory of film that significantly departs from Deleuze. Agamben has developed a new theory of 'gestural cinema', arguing that '*the element of cinema is gesture and not image*'. [1] He has also argued that this new theory of gestural cinema means that cinema belongs, essentially, to the realm of ethics and politics, and not aesthetics. It is this new theory that I want to introduce.

Giorgio Agamben is professor of aesthetics at the University of Verona, Italy, and he works on the margins of literature, philosophy, and politics. His philosophy is indebted, primarily, to Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin (he directed the Italian edition of Benjamin's works), creating a critical dialogue between these two thinkers. Most of his major writings have been translated into English, including _The Coming Community_ (1993) and _Homo Sacer_ (1998), two important works of political philosophy. [2] However, he has also written two brief but fascinating essays on cinema, which have attracted little discussion. The first is 'Notes on Gesture' (1992), in which he sketches a new theory of film, and the second is 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films' (1995), in which he draws on the filmmaking practice of Guy Debord as an example of a new ethical and political cinema. It is these two essays that I want to discuss to introduce Giorgio Agamben as a philosopher of film.

The essay 'Notes on Gesture' does not begin with the cinema but rather with

what Agamben claims is the disappearance of gestures amongst the Western bourgeoisie at the end of the 19th century. Drawing on scanty historical evidence he argues that the scientific analysis of gesture begun by Gilles de la Tourette indicates the breaking up of gesture into segments. This not only presages film itself (Agamben also mentions the work of Muybridge) but also the loss of any sense of the gesture. Tourette is, of course, best known for naming Tourette's syndrome, which Agamben describes as 'an amazing proliferation of tics, spasmodic jerks, and mannerisms -- a proliferation that cannot be defined in any way other than as a generalized catastrophe of the sphere of gestures'. [3] What is strange about this syndrome is that, after many cases being found initially, the syndrome seemed to disappear. The neurologist Oliver Sacks only rediscovered it in the 1970s, and Agamben argues that this 'disappearance' may be due to the fact that 'at some point everybody had lost control of their gestures and was walking and gesticulating frantically'. [4]

What has this got to do with cinema? The loss of gestures leads to a desperate attempt to recover or record what has been lost. Cinema, especially silent cinema, is the primary and exemplary medium for trying to evoke gestures in the process of their loss. Deleuze defines the images of cinema as, initially, movement-images, and Agamben extends this analysis. If Deleuze breaks down the image into movement-images, Agamben will further break down the image into gestures. If the unity of the image has been broken, then we are left with only gestures and not images. What is this fragmentation of the image? The image is a kind of force field that holds together two opposing forces. The first is that the image reifies and obliterates the gesture, fixing it into the static image. The second is that the image also preserves the dynamic force of the gesture, linking the gesture to a whole. What we need to do is to liberate this dynamic force from the static spell of the image.

The importance of cinema is that it restores images to this dynamic movement. In a sense the film still is the image that obliterates the gesture -- but as, precisely, a *still*, it relates the image back to the whole and to gesture. The power of cinema is that, in Agamben's words, it 'leads images back to the homeland of gestures'. [5] If cinema leads us back to gestures then it also leads us back to ethics and politics, but not to aesthetics. According to Agamben, the gesture is a particular type of action -- it is neither about acting or making, producing or action, but instead about enduring and supporting. It is neither a means in view of an end, nor an end without a means, it is means as such. Agamben takes the example of dance -- what dance exhibits is not a movement that has an end in itself, but movement for its own sake; dance as aesthetic. Dance exhibits the gesture as such, the medium of the gesture itself, or pure means without end. What the gesture opens is our own being-in-a-medium, our own ethical and political dimension. The gesture, as such, leaves us in the realm of mediality.

It also leaves us in close proximity to both philosophy and cinema, and it

can allow us to think about what links them together. What both philosophy and cinema exhibit, according to Agamben, is this pure mediality or pure gesturality. This is of course a philosophy that comes after Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Benjamin. A philosophy of language that exhibits our being-in-language as the medium of our expression -- not the philosophy of particular forms of communication but philosophy of communicability. In a similar way what Agamben calls cinema's essential silence, which for him has nothing to do with the presence or absence of a soundtrack, can also expose our being-in-language or 'pure gesturality'. [6] Therefore philosophy and cinema converge on the gesture, on the loss of the gesture, and on recovering the gesture as the realm of both the ethical and the political. What, then, would be a purely gestural cinema?

Perhaps one place to begin is Agamben's example of the cinematic practice of Guy Debord. Debord was not only the theorist and critic of the spectacle, he was also a filmmaker, directing six black-and-white sound films between 1952 and 1978. [7] Agamben attempts to explain Debord's cinematic strategy in relation to the image, and how this practice brings ethics and politics into play. Again, like Deleuze, Debord reveals that images are not static but images in movement, or gestural in the terms Agamben had previously used. How does he do this? Debord reveals the image in movement by revealing the conditions of cinematic montage. Again, this is a matter of exhibiting the medium as such, as pure means. In doing so Debord reveals that cinematic montage works through two conditions: repetition and stoppage. Once this is revealed cinema starts to work on itself, dissolving the boundary between genres and working on its own images.

The power of cinema, and the power of cinematic montage, is to free the image from its frozen state and transform it back into gesture. It can reveal the potential of the image, and release what has been frozen in the image. Montage is not simply a repetition of the identical, because in repetition this dynamic potential of the image is returned to us. On the other hand 'stoppage' in montage interrupts the stream of images. It brings the image to a stop and exhibits it as such, again as gesture. In this way these two opposing conditions, repetition and stoppage, both work to free the potential of the image and to return it to the movement of the gesture. This is what Debord does in his films, working on images he both repeats images to free the gestures fixed within them and stops images to allow us to think the image as such. As Rene Vienet notes, the power of cinema for the Situationists was that it could lend itself 'to dismantling processes of reification'. [8] In Agamben's terms, Debord's cinematic practice dismantles the image to reveal the gesture. The task of cinema is to create but also to decreate, to decreate what exists to create something new.

What then happens to the image? The spontaneous ideology of communication is that the medium is secondary to expression. When something is 'properly' expressed we no longer notice the medium. The repetition and stoppage of montage reveal the medium, the 'pure means', and allow it to be shown as such. Not so much particular images but the image as medium: 'The image

gives itself to be seen instead of disappearing into what makes it visible'. [9] Agamben gives two very different examples of this showing of the image as such, which reveal that the image is, in fact, imageless, because it is no longer an image of anything. One is pornography or advertising, in which the image is revealed as deficient, exposed as such, *but only to lead us on to more images*. There are always more images promised that will fulfill our desire but this image as such is not it. The other way, Debord's way, is to exhibit the image and so to allow the appearance of 'imagelessness'. In this case there is no longer some other image but the end of the image. It is in the difference between these two strategies that the ethics and politics of cinema exist.

Of course all this fits with an avant-garde and modernist cinema, with which I personally have a great deal of sympathy. However, many film theorists may well experience a sense of deja vu, seeing in Agamben's theory a restatement of the kind of criticism and film practice associated with the journal _Screen_ in the 1970s. Certainly Agamben is hostile to narrative cinema and applauds an avant-garde cinema that can reveal the cinematic medium as such. Although, of course, he does not see this strategy of the image as confined to avant-garde cinema. In fact, his theory may help explain why advertising is attracted to avant-garde film and art, where advertising draws on this revelation of the image to lead us back into further images instead of decreating the image as such. Also, Agamben's theory might help us to think of a cinematic ethics and politics of the gesture, released from being frozen in the image.

One example of this could be the well-known scene from Krzysztof Kieslowski's _Three Colours: Blue_ (1993) of the lump of sugar being dissolved in the coffee cup. In his 1994 master class on this scene Kieslowski states that the use of close-ups such as this one is to convey the mental state of the film's heroine. In her grief she can only focus on the small things, things close to her, such as the cube of sugar slowly being dissolved by the coffee. Her concentration on the sugar cube is what allows her to shut out everything else, other people, and, in particular, the man who has just expressed his love to her. Kieslowski explains the trouble he went to so that the cube would dissolve in precisely the right time for the shot. His assistant spent half a day soaking sugar cubes to find the right one so this 'detail' would last no longer, and no shorter, than four and a half seconds. Why all this trouble for a sugar cube? As Kieslowski explains: to convey the mental state of the heroine within the tolerances of the audience to watch a cube of sugar soaking up coffee.

However, could we not also see this scene, after Agamben, as the recovery of a gesture as simple as dropping a sugar cube into coffee. The cube touches the surface of the coffee and in four and a half seconds the coffee soaks into the cube which is then dropped into the coffee. In this 'stoppage' the dynamic potential of the image is freed as we are forced, if only for four and a half seconds, to watch the coffee slowly soaking into the cube. In this way, it may be, the image of dropping sugar into coffee is decreated

and our attention drawn to the image and the gesture as such. Rather than only being an image of the heroine's alienation, her lack of connection to the world, this image of the lack of connection opens our connection to the gesture and to the image as the gesture of connection. No other image is promised, this is the ethics and politics of this scene. Instead the image becomes imageless and the gesture is freed as pure means. No longer simply a beautiful aesthetic image, but also the exhibiting of the gesture as our medium, the pure means of our being-in-the-world.

Ethics and politics in a sugar cube? No doubt we could be dubious, but I think Agamben's rather strange theory can help us to approach both film and philosophy differently. He draws attention to the silence of cinema and to the silence of philosophy as practices that suspend our relation to communication all the better to reveal communicability as such. Whether we have lost our gestures or not, Agamben redeems cinema as a site of the messianic promise contained in the image. Every image is, as he paraphrases Walter Benjamin, 'charged with history because it is the door through which the Messiah enters'. [9]

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Notes

1. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 55.

2. For a bibliography of Agamben's writing, and further biographical information, see <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgioagamben.html>.

3. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 51.

4. Ibid., p. 52.

5. Ibid., p. 55.

6. Ibid., p. 60.

7. For a description of Debord's filmmaking practice, see Thomas Y. Levin's article 'Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord' (1989).

8. Rene Vienet, quoted in Levin, 'Dismantling the Spectacle', p. 330.

9. Agamben, 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films', p. 315.

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